

USAWC STRATEGY RESEARCH PROJECT

THE FUTURE OF THE AFGHAN INSURGENCY

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ABSTRACT

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Since the fall of the Taliban in November of 2001, the insurgency in Afghanistan has undergone a metamorphosis. Once written off as defeated, the Taliban are staging a comeback. Aided to a large degree by the sanctuary provided by refuges in the Federally Administered Tribal Areas in Pakistan, the Taliban have survived the initial onslaught of Coalition forces and begun a re-emergence as a viable political and military opposition to the democratically elected Karzai government in Kabul. This re-birth is the result of both a political and military vacuum throughout the country, and exploitation of Pashtun tribal fissures, particularly in the south, by the Taliban. Additionally, the Taliban have implemented a revised military strategy which, although unique to Afghanistan, has adopted some of the more successful tactics of Iraqi insurgents. The purpose of this paper is to examine these recent developments and forecast trends to determine the potential implications on future Coalition military and political strategy.

THE FUTURE OF THE AFGHAN INSURGENCY

The Changing Nature of the Insurgency

The speed at which the Taliban regime collapsed in the fall of 2001 was indicative of the lack of support for the fundamentalist Islamic government outside of their traditional tribal homelands in the south. Indeed, for most Afghans, the initial embrace of the Taliban in the mid-1990s was made not out of deeply held agreement and commitment to the Taliban's beliefs and ideals, but out of a sense of desperation. The population was eager for any group who provided an alternative to the chaos and lawlessness that followed the withdrawal of Soviet forces in 1989, the collapse of the Najibullah regime in 1992 and the subsequent years of civil war.

On the surface, the Taliban seemed to offer the security and stability that most people thought was missing from their daily lives. The Taliban promised to bring a halt to the seemingly endless rounds of factional fighting, and to restore the rule of law and order. It was not until after they had come to power that most Afghans realized they had sacrificed both their personal and political freedom to win the peace that they so desperately sought.

The pre-9/11 Taliban conquest of most of Afghanistan followed a similar pattern. The Taliban would apply steady military pressure to an area until local warlords/tribal chiefs either submitted or fled in defeat. Once in power, the Taliban appointed a local/regional governor chosen from among the trusted Pashtun ranks, and immediately imposed their interpretation of Sharia law on the local population. The case of Herat provides an illustrative example. Following the defeat of local warlord Ismael Khan in September 1995, the Taliban appointed an administration comprised almost entirely of Durrani Pashtuns and implemented their strict form of Sharia law. The implementation of the law included bans on what they considered to be 'un-Islamic' social contact between men and women, and enforcement of strict dress codes. Additionally, the Taliban immediately closed down every girl's school in the city and even proscribed that women were forbidden from studying at home.¹

Needless to say, to the more cosmopolitan populations of Afghanistan such as those found in Herat, Kabul, Mazar-e Sharif, and other large urban centers these restrictions were unwelcome limitations to the personal freedoms that they had enjoyed for decades, if not centuries. Additionally, the domination of local politics by Pashtuns appointed by the central government to rule over non-Pashtun areas bred resentment and conflict. Most of these leaders were poorly educated and demonstrated more concern for imposing strict adherence to Taliban rule than they did for the welfare of the local population.

In areas where the Taliban met resistance, their response was both harsh and indiscriminate. In Bamian Province, Taliban commanders used a combination of starvation of

the indigenous population and military operations to ruthlessly suppress the native Hazara Shia populace. In Mazar-e Sharif, the massacre of Taliban forces in 1997 was followed by what can only be described as a reprisal massacre (allegedly authorized by Mullah Omar) in August of 1998 that included the targeting of the city's Tajik and Hazara Shia civilian population and left an estimated 6000 to 8000 dead.²

However, it was not just the denial of personal freedoms, Pashtun hegemony of the central government, and usually brutal suppression of opposition that led to their widespread unpopularity. In time, most Afghans were also to realize that the Taliban offered little to nothing in the way of economic development and recovery. Following their dramatic victories in Herat, Kabul, Bamian, and across the northern provinces during the period 1995-1998, the Taliban were often dependent on the international community to provide the basic necessities of life for the local populations. However, as time passed the Taliban proved ineffective at organizing a government that was capable of providing the most rudimentary of services. At the same time, through threats and intimidation, they had succeeded in alienating the United Nations and the various Non-Governmental Organizations that they relied on to provide the basic necessities that they themselves could not. The end result was a worsening humanitarian crisis within the country created by the gradual diminishing of external support and the inability, and unwillingness, of the Taliban to take the steps needed to assume the responsibility for themselves.³

Additionally, the Taliban showed no signs of conforming to international standards of behavior that might bring it additional support. In fact, throughout the period the Taliban had become increasingly isolated on the international stage. Their fundamentalist ideology, perceived disregard for human rights as demonstrated by the harsh imposition of Sharia law, poor treatment of women, and sometimes brutal conduct of its military forces had alienated the regime from most of the outside world. While the Taliban had come to power in part due to the substantial military aid it received from Pakistan, and to a lesser extent from the financial backing of Saudi Arabia and other wealthy patrons in the Gulf, that aid would in no way be sufficient to facilitate a recovery from 20 years of war. The aid from Pakistan was largely military in nature and had taken the form of money, equipment and training, and perhaps most importantly, military manpower. (The Government of Pakistan supported the flow of tens of thousands of madrassa students from Pakistan into Afghanistan that had swelled the ranks of the Taliban at critical times during their advance northward⁴.) While this aid was instrumental in facilitating a Taliban military victory, it did not provide for the day-to-day operation of a civilian government.

As a result of their harsh rule and inept handling of the government and the economy, by late 2001 the Taliban had worn out their welcome throughout most of Afghanistan. Although in many cases they had brought the peace and stability that was wanted, they offered little hope for the future. When Northern Alliance forces swept Afghanistan in November and December 2001, the Taliban were forced to flee into remote areas of their native provinces in the south or across the border into Pakistan. Given their lack of domestic support outside their home towns and villages as evidenced by their quick collapse, and the manner in which Coalition Forces were greeted upon their arrival, how is it possible that they have proven to be so resilient? What appeal could the Taliban possibly have other than to those committed to the cause for radical religious reasons or to those closely associated to the inner circle of Taliban leadership who benefited from their domination?

Changes to the Taliban Strategy

It was obvious by their words and deeds that the Taliban had adjusted both their strategy and tactics in 2005-2006. Having survived the initial onslaught of Coalition Forces in 2001-2004, the Taliban are attempting to seize the initiative by making the transition from strategic defensive to the strategic offensive. In statements to the press, senior Taliban leadership, including Taliban leader Mullah Omar, senior Taliban commander Mullah Dadullah Lang, and others, have broadly outlined their strategy and intentions.⁵

Although they have not provided any insight into their decision making process, an analysis of the factors affecting the political and military environment in Afghanistan today, and an examination of how they have adapted their tactics provides clues into the evolution of their strategic vision. It also provides a baseline for an analysis of how the insurgency is likely to continue to adapt in the coming years as the Taliban leadership continues to pursue its goal of returning to national power.

Factors Affecting the Environment

Popular Support

Unlike the Iraq insurgency, insurgents in Afghanistan do not enjoy widespread popular support⁶. This is due primarily to three reasons. The first is the perception of US/Coalition Forces as a stabilizing (and transitional) force as opposed to an occupying power. The majority of Afghans accept the legitimacy of the US/ISAF as an international military presence sent to aid in reconstruction and recovery. Although I would stop short of saying that we are loved by most Afghans, we are tolerated. Given the British experience with a hostile Afghan population in the

19th century, and a similar experience by the Russians in the 20th century, the benefits of that toleration should not be underestimated.⁷

The second reason why the insurgency is not widely popular is the collective memory of the Afghan population of their experience with the Taliban when they were in power from 1996-2001. Without question, the Hazara, Tajik, Uzbek, and other minority populations have no illusions about what Taliban domination would bring, or perhaps more appropriately, bring back. Additionally, while Taliban support is mainly derived from Pashtun areas, the Pashtun community is itself divided. Pashtuns do not view the Taliban as a Pashtun nationalist movement or representative of all the tribes but instead see them for what they are – a relatively small political entity with an active military wing and an ultra-conservative religious ideology. As a result, the Taliban also do not enjoy widespread support even among their core constituency.⁸

The third reason has to do with both war-weariness and the potential for recovery. Most Afghans recognize the significance of the opportunity provided by the commitment of the international community to reconstruction. From experience, they doubt the Taliban's ability to govern effectively, and their ability, or even willingness, to sustain the same level of external support. To them the international community is the safer bet because they bring with them the required resources and technical expertise to get the job done.⁹

This lack of public support has had a substantial impact on Taliban strategy, tactics and the way they conduct their public diplomacy. Unlike Iraq where many insurgent groups have fueled sectarian violence by deliberately attacking non-combatant civilian populations, the Afghan insurgency, with a few notable exceptions, has been much more careful to avoid collateral civilian deaths. The Taliban appear to be deeply concerned with the potential backlash that would likely result from attacks on civilian populations. The Taliban are sensitive to this lack of public support because of the tribal ties that most Taliban leaders still have with their communities and their collective experience during the Soviet occupation and subsequent years of civil war. Additionally, a reduced presence of religiously motivated radical foreign fighters (as compared to Iraq) with no ties to the community or concern with civilian deaths has had a moderating influence on the Taliban's decision making. Because they wish to portray themselves as the true representatives of the people of Afghanistan in order to maintain or perhaps increase their public appeal, they must demonstrate some sensitivity to the suffering that the Afghan people have endured over the past 25 years. That sensitivity has taken the form of minimizing the potential for civilian non-combatant collateral damage.

Tribal Dynamics

In Afghanistan, as is the case everywhere else, all politics are local. The Afghan Presidential Election in October 2004, and the National Assembly and Provincial Council Elections in September 2005 are all important milestones for the re-establishment of a national government and government bureaucracy. The emergence of a weak government at the national and provincial levels has been mirrored by the establishment of local governments at the district level. As this government has coalesced, what has emerged is not a western-style representative democracy but one whose members, particularly at the local level in rural areas, continue to identify more with their tribal/ethnic group than they do with the geographically area they were elected to represent. This has created situations where whole tribal groupings feel unable to defend themselves from the Taliban, alienated from the political process, or worse, victimized by a rival tribe that holds government office.¹⁰

In many ways it is naïve to assume that all locally elected Afghan officials will put aside their tribal and ethnic biases and act in accordance with the collective good. All politicians have constituencies, those in western democracies included, that forms the basis of their popular support and keeps them in office. The Afghans are no different. But the politics of exclusion in Afghanistan have far more serious consequences than in the West. For example, being a registered Democrat or Republican in the United States does not mean that you lose your livelihood, access to the judicial system to settle disputes, or your sense of physical security if your party is not elected to office. Life continues pretty much as normal with all of the basic necessities of life either provided or readily available.

The same cannot be said in Afghanistan. Being excluded from the political process there can pose a threat to your very survival. It can mean less access to recovery and reconstruction aid and projects, and the reduced presence of security forces. Even worse, in some cases involving longstanding disputes between tribes, it may involve the use of security forces by one side to settle those disputes. In a country that has not had a functioning judicial system in over 25 years, exclusion from the political process can mean you may have no legal recourse to settle grievances. Finally, the use of political power or security forces to support criminal activity targeting rival individuals or tribes is widespread.

The Taliban, particularly in southern Afghanistan, are keenly aware of the current shortfalls in the political and judicial systems, particularly at the local level. They are becoming masters of exploiting tribal fissures and grievances that are serious to those parties involved and somewhat invisible to Coalition authorities and the central government in Kabul. As a result, I would argue that the apparent growth in support for the Taliban in the south is less about a

renewed commitment to their ultra-conservative Islamic ideology than it is about the appeal of the Taliban as a viable political alternative, which in some cases is the only alternative, to the emerging and sometimes flawed Afghan government structure.

Pakistan

The Afghan insurgency could not survive but for the sanctuary provided it in the Federally Administrated Tribal Areas in Pakistan. Despite significant Pakistani efforts to combat extremism to include the capture of several high profile Al Qaeda and Taliban leaders and major military operations aimed at expanding Islamabad's sovereignty in the FATA, Pakistan remains a safe haven for Afghan insurgents. According to senior Coalition and Afghan officials, there is strong evidence that Pakistan provides not only a refuge for the insurgent senior leadership, but also serves as a recruiting and training ground for insurgent fighters.¹¹

The problems in the FATA and northern Balochistan stem from historically weak central government control, a sympathetic Pashtun population with close ties to the tribes in Afghanistan, endemic poverty, and a 2400-kilometer border that to a large extent is neither patrolled or even recognized by the local population. While significant progress has been made between the US, Pakistan and Afghanistan on combined border security operations, the sheer size of the border and difficulty of terrain make sealing it a near impossible task. Additionally, while there has been some discussion between the three parties on creation of a border barrier, such as a fence, it has met with fierce local resistance and skepticism as to both cost and feasibility.

The Illegal Narcotics Industry

In 2005, the size of the illegal narcotics industry in Afghanistan was about 51% of the size of the legal economy, and generated approximately \$2.7 billion in revenues for growers and traffickers.¹² There are no reliable estimates of illegal narcotics related crime, but associated corruption permeates every level of Afghan society. From the local farmers who break the law in the hope of providing a slightly better than sustenance level of existence for their families, to the government officials who protect the lab owners and traffickers (or who often control the local industry) in order to profit themselves, large segments of the Afghan populace are involved in the trade. Beyond the threat to public health, the illegal drug industry undermines the nascent rule of law by turning ordinary farmers into criminals and local government officials into willing participants whose first priority is to protect the trade as opposed to serving the people. From an Information Operations perspective, the Taliban have been quick to exploit alleged linkages between the illegal narcotics industry and the Afghan government.¹³ After the insurgency, the

illegal narcotics industry poses the greatest threat to the long-term peace and stability of the country.

Despite their ideological objections to poppy cultivation, the Taliban fully understand that the illegal narcotics industry is part of the operating environment of Afghanistan. When pressed, the Taliban can be very pragmatic when it comes to dealing with the business. Although many remember Mullah Omar's initial ban on poppy cultivation once the Taliban came to power in Kabul, few recall that the Taliban had a history of cooperation with the industry when their interests were served. For, example, in 1994 they built an alliance with lesser drug lords to wrestle control of Helmand Province away from Ghaffar Akhunzadeh, the de facto ruler of Helmand and local king of the opium trade.¹⁴ Only after they had secured control of most of the country did they turn on the drug lords.

Now out of power, the Taliban have resumed a more pragmatic view of the trade. They see it as both a source of funding, and a means with which to drive a wedge between local populations and the central government. Funding usually takes the form of protection money paid by traffickers to local Taliban commanders to prevent attacks on their fields or workers. A form of extortion, it is nonetheless successful as a fundraising tool. Additionally, some Taliban commanders have been involved in more active measures, such as providing convoy security to drug shipments, in exchange for payment. The benefits of this system to local commanders are significant when you consider that the alternative to raising funds locally is to have the money hand couriered to remote locations from sanctuaries in Pakistan and elsewhere.

Probably the most effective use of the illegal narcotics industry by the Taliban has been as a mechanism to divide the people from the Karzai government. Nowhere has this been more effective than in Kandahar and the Helmand River Valley in Helmand and Uruzgan Provinces. In March and April 2006, the Afghan government launched an aggressive poppy eradication operation in the area to destroy local poppy crops. The Taliban responded by offering local tribes and farmers protection in the form of men and material from the Afghan government forces. Because the operation focused more on eradication than it did on promoting alternative crops to the poor farmers, the Taliban were often viewed as defenders of the local population from an indifferent government. Though the tangible impact of the Taliban assistance was likely minimal, it provided them with a needed psychological victory. To the local subsistence farmer, only the Taliban appeared sympathetic to their plight.¹⁵

NATO/ISAF Expansion

The transition of responsibility for military operations in Afghanistan from a US led international coalition to the NATO led International Security Assistance Force (ISAF) began in 2004 with the transfer of responsibility for operations in the eight northern provinces that comprise Regional Command (RC) North. That transition was followed in 2005 with the transfer to ISAF of the four provinces in RC West. However, it was not until 2006 that NATO, and more importantly NATO conventional forces, took over responsibility for a Regional Command with an active and large insurgent presence that would require continuous combat operations to address – that is, RC South.

Until 2006, the US had provided the bulk of conventional ground forces in RC South. However, starting in early 2006, significant numbers of Canadian and British forces began to arrive in Kandahar and Helmand Provinces in preparation for the eventual transition to ISAF control that occurred on 1 August.¹⁶ These forces were followed by the arrival of Dutch troops into Uruzgan Province later in the summer. From a US perspective, the introduction of these forces symbolized, and enhanced, the depth of the international community's commitment to Afghanistan's recovery. From the Taliban's perspective the arrival of these forces meant something different.

To them, the Coalition was substantially increasing the number of conventional forces in RC South and introducing large numbers of Coalition Forces into places where neither the Coalition nor Afghan National Security Forces had been present before. The largest increase in troop presence occurred in Helmand Province with the introduction of a British Battle Group of 3500 soldiers where before only 150 American troops had been stationed. For the Taliban, this troop introduction was viewed as a direct challenge within areas that they had considered either relatively safe or at least neutral due to the lack of Coalition Force presence.

At the strategic level, ISAF expansion introduced foreign troops into contested areas of Afghanistan that were viewed perhaps as less committed and less capable as compared to US forces. Although not particularly sophisticated in their understanding of world affairs, the Taliban do understand the nature of coalitions and alliances. In this way, the presence of additional Coalition combat forces was viewed as both a threat and an opportunity if the Taliban could apply enough pressure on those nations involved to cause them to withdraw.

Conflict in Iraq

The conflict in Iraq has aided the Taliban in two ways. First, it has fueled continued resentment among Muslims against the United States by bringing into question American

intentions in the Middle East specifically and towards the Islamic community as a whole. In its press releases, the Taliban have linked the conflict in Iraq with the insurgency in Afghanistan in an effort to feed the perception that the US is involved in a religious war against Islam.¹⁷ While the extent to which this message has helped the Taliban is unknown, it undoubtedly resonates within the extremist community and among their sympathizers, and has most likely boosted recruiting and fundraising efforts.

The second way the conflict in Iraq has assisted the Taliban is by providing a proving ground for insurgent tactics, techniques, and procedures. Without question, the use of suicide bombers by Iraqi insurgents had an impact on the Taliban leadership's decision to employ similar tactics in Afghanistan beginning in 2005. While the linkage between the two insurgencies remains limited and the speed with which the migration of technical advances in weapons development (such as advanced IED manufacture) remains slow, the Taliban are keenly aware that events in Iraq are relevant to their struggle in Afghanistan.

Continued Availability of Weapons and Ammunition

Despite Coalition attempts to reduce the availability of arms and ammunition among the general public, supplies remain plentiful and relatively cheap in both Afghanistan and within the Federally Administered Tribal Areas in Pakistan. In Afghanistan, Coalition forces continue to collect, either from deliberate turn-ins or discoveries, illegal weapons caches from around the country. Numerous caches are found each week. They range in size from a few simple assault rifles with accompanying ammunition to huge stockpiles that include shoulder-fired man-portable air defense missiles, large numbers of 107-mm rockets, crew-served automatic weapons, plastic explosives, and, occasionally, armored vehicles.

There are no records of exactly what was shipped into Afghanistan during the Soviet occupation or during the period of the civil war from 1989-2001, so there is no record of who maintains these caches. Some are held for personal use by individuals that still have little faith in the growing Afghan National Security Forces or judiciary. Others are maintained by tribes and warlords at the collective level but for the same reason as the average Afghan. For all, the retention of weapons caches is both a way of hedging bets on the likely success of the current Afghan government and a potential source of funds if they choose to sell them on the black market.

In addition to caches in Afghanistan, a thriving black market for arms and munitions exists just across the border in the FATA. This market includes stockpiles of weapons that remain from the Soviet occupation and civil war periods, and towns whose economies are based in part on a

thriving industry of local metal smiths who can produce functional copies of most modern automatic weapons. The result is a plentiful and relatively cheap supply of weapons in an area in which the Pakistani government exerts nominal control. "A 2003 survey by SPADO found there were 1,200 shops selling guns in Darra Adam Khel alone. These were supplied by nearly 1,500 small workshops and more than 50 medium-scale manufacturing units employing over 6,000 gunsmiths." ¹⁸

Foreign Funding

To a large extent, the Afghan insurgency relies on foreign donors for the funding it needs to sustain operations. In considering the sources of these funds, the US should keep in mind that the Taliban has had 25 years to develop close ties to potential backers in Pakistan and in the Gulf States. In all likelihood, Taliban funding efforts are also being fueled by the increased animosity toward the United States over events in Iraq, as well as high oil prices which undoubtedly creates additional disposable income for wealthy individuals in the Gulf. It is safe to assume that since 2004, the Taliban have been successful in raising money to support an insurgency that does not require a very high capital investment to begin with. The readily available stores of weapons and ammunition, coupled with an economy that supports an average monthly wage of less than \$212/month¹⁹ means that there are ample supplies of men and materiel available at cheap prices.²⁰

Tactics

Since 2004, the Taliban have conducted their own assessment of the political and military situation inside Afghanistan and have adjusted their tactics accordingly. The changes have taken the shape of an increased reliance on the use of suicide bombers, the selective targeting of discreet target sets, and the incorporation of what can best be described as local militias into their operations in RC South. These changes are intended to support a strategy that is focused on attacking the growing power of the central government throughout southern and eastern Afghanistan with the intent of de-legitimizing the government in the eyes of the people.

Suicide Bombings

Suicide bombings are a new phenomenon to Afghan culture. There was no history of suicide operations in Afghanistan during even the most tumultuous periods of the 19th and 20th centuries. Even today, there is a stubborn reluctance on the part of Afghan government and military officials to admit that Afghans are participating in these attacks. In private, most are quick to tell you that the bombers are actually Pakistanis recruited and brainwashed in the FATA

before being sent into Afghanistan to conduct an attack. Yet they usually offer no proof to support their claims and in time you are left with the very strong impression that what they are telling you is derived from their deeply held belief that Afghans could not do such things as opposed to the facts of the incident. In other words, they are in denial.

Perhaps the exact truth will never be known. Positive identification of the attackers is often limited by the lack of identifiable remains (there is often little left of the bomber after one of these attacks) and/or the lack of an identification database. However, one statistic is indisputable – the number of suicide attacks is clearly on the rise. In 2001, there was only one suicide attack in Afghanistan. In 2002, there were none, and in 2003, there were four. In 2006, there were 140 suicide attacks,²¹ targeting mostly Coalition Forces and Afghan government officials.

In 2006 there were over 200 civilian casualties associated with the bombings; almost all of these casualties have been the result of collateral damage caused during an attack.²² While the Taliban have learned from insurgent experiences in Iraq and have been quick to employ suicide bombings tactics, their targeting strategy remains vastly different. For the Taliban, the suicide bomber is the most efficient means of inflicting casualties and undermining confidence in the new government. It is perhaps the most effective way for an insurgency that does not enjoy widespread popular support and is still essentially rural to employ limited resources in a manner that provides for the possibility of maximum effect and media coverage.

It is important to point out that the Taliban have not made any attempt to incite the kind of sectarian violence seen in Iraq. Given Afghanistan's diverse ethnic (Pashtun 42%, Tajik 27%, Hazara 9%, Uzbek 9%, Aimak 4%, Turkmen 3%, Baloch 2%, Other 4%) and religious (Sunni 80%, Shi'a 19%, other 1%) mix,²³ the creation of ethnic strife through the deliberate targeting of civilian ethnic populations is a viable course of action open to the Taliban if they do not believe they can succeed in de-legitimizing the government through other means. The fact that they have yet to employ this strategy is an indication of their concern over the popular backlash against them it would create if such a strategy were to be adopted. Unlike Iraq where Coalition Forces are largely viewed as an occupying power, in Afghanistan both Coalition Forces and the Afghan government enjoy much broader support. The Taliban understand that they are in competition with the government for the hearts and minds of the Afghan people with the government enjoying broad acceptance, if not always popularity.

Selective Targeting

In many respects, the targeting strategy of the Afghan insurgency follows a predictable pattern. Insurgents attack both military and government targets in an effort to undermine the

existing government and extend their own span of control. However, the nature of the Afghan insurgency with its own unique cultural, religious and historic elements has had a significant impact on the Taliban's decision making process of what is, and what is not, targeted. Below is a list of the target sets that currently represent the focus of Taliban targeting efforts.

Coalition Military Forces

Coalition military forces have been and will continue to be a primary target for Afghan insurgents. The insurgents have attempted to portray Coalition troops as an occupying force. As part of their Information Operations strategy, they try to paint the conflict in terms of a religious struggle between the Christian West and the Islamic world. As noted earlier, the introduction of ISAF forces into Afghanistan has added a new dimension to their targeting strategy as they now face Coalition conventional forces from countries other than the US.

Afghan Government Officials

Afghan government officials have also been a prime target for insurgents. The major difference between the period of 2005-2006 and the preceding years is the growth of the Afghan government within the districts in each province. This has created both an increased threat to the insurgents at the local level and a more target rich environment. Although better protected than their counterparts at the district level and below, both senior national and provincial level officials continue to be the target for spectacular attacks, particularly suicide bombings.

Afghan National Security Forces (ANSF)

Generally viewed as less capable than Coalition forces, and not as well armored or equipped, ANSF are also a focus for Afghan insurgent attacks. As in the case of increasing numbers of Afghan government officials, the growing ranks of ANSF present a direct threat to the insurgents at the local level and a more target rich environment. As would be expected, isolated and poorly manned outposts are the prime targets.

Pro-Government Clergy

In a departure from more traditional insurgent targeting strategies, in 2004 the Taliban began a campaign to intentionally target Afghan clergymen who it felt were supporting the government. Despite the risk of public backlash, the Taliban began this campaign because they perceived it as a direct threat to their religious legitimacy, and because the pro-government clergy were an effective means of communicating the government's message to the average Afghan. In a country where the typical citizen does not enjoy easy access to mass media, news

is often spread by word of mouth. The clergy were proving an effective way for the government to reach the people because they enjoyed regular access and carried legitimacy.²⁴

Education Infrastructure²⁵

In another departure from traditional insurgent strategies, in 2004 the Taliban began a campaign of deliberately targeting education infrastructure focusing on facilities, teachers, and administrators. Because there is a conservative religious influence throughout the country and due to the lack of security force presence in many rural areas, not all attacks against education infrastructure can be attributed to insurgents. However, in the Pashtun south and east, the Taliban have initiated a campaign to target any educational institution that it believes is not conforming to its ultra-conservative Islamic views, particularly on the co-education of men and women.

In its early phases the Taliban uses 'night letters' posted anonymously throughout a town or village to warn residents that a school has become a possible target for attack. When the attack occurs it typically takes place in the middle of the night and involves an assault on the physical structure of the school with an incendiary device (e.g. Molotov cocktail) often in combination with an explosive (old artillery shell). However, much more brutal and callous attacks involving the execution of teachers and administrators have also taken place.²⁶

Reconstruction Workers

Afghan reconstruction workers, to include Coalition military forces directly involved in reconstruction work, are frequently targeted. Although insurgent commander's decisions to attack reconstruction workers are often weighed against the perceived reaction of the local community that would be affected by the consequences of the action, there have been several high profile attacks against contractors working on the Ring Road that runs in a large semi-circle within Afghanistan around the foothills of the Hindu Kush Mountains. While these attacks have not halted repairs or improvements to the road, they have slowed progress by forcing some donor nations to temporarily withdraw their workers, and have significantly increased the cost of security thereby making the actual completion costs much higher than what was actually budgeted.²⁷

What is Not Targeted

Interestingly, Afghan insurgents do not generally target civilian infrastructure. Unlike Iraq, where oil pipelines and electrical infrastructure are routinely attacked, Afghan insurgents tend to avoid these types of attacks. One reason could be the relative lack of infrastructure throughout

the country and therefore the lack of targets to attack. However, a more likely explanation is again tied to the Taliban's perception of weak popular support and the repercussions such attacks would likely have among a population that has suffered incredible hardship during 25 years of war.

Massing of Forces for Attacks

A third and final change in insurgent tactics that has occurred largely in the past 18 months, is tied to the Taliban's ability to mass relatively large numbers (100-400) of fighters for attacks in the south. However, this change in tactics is more notable for its implications concerning growing popular support at the local level than it is for its success on the battlefield.²⁸ In June of 2005, the Taliban massed 100-125 fighters in the Miana Shin District of Kandahar Province for an attack against the District Government Headquarters. Although the insurgents were at least temporarily successful in accomplishing their objectives, the end result was a tactical disaster. Coalition and Afghan Forces responded to the attack with ground forces supported by close air support. In the end, the insurgents were forced to flee, suffering casualties perhaps as high as 75% or greater.

After the battle was over, many senior Coalition and Afghan officers had assumed that the Taliban had learned a painful lesson and would not attempt such massing of forces for attacks again for the foreseeable future. But events in Kandahar and Helmand Provinces in 2006 would prove them wrong. Throughout 2006, the Taliban proved both capable and willing to mass forces despite the painful lesson of Miana Shin. Although these tactics often resulted in high casualties and rarely achieved any long-term military purpose, they often succeeded in severely shaking the confidence of district and provincial level government and military officials.

They were also significant in that they demonstrated the Taliban's ability to generate significant numbers of armed recruits from among the local population. It is the use of these recruits in mass that represents the change in tactics, and also, a change in capability. But what is behind this change? What is motivating these people to fight? The introduction of ISAF conventional forces (British) into Helmand Province and Afghan government poppy eradication operations in the Helmand River Valley coupled with skillful Taliban manipulation of tribal fissures and public opinion are most likely to blame.

What the Future Holds for the Insurgency

In many respects, the surge in Taliban activity over the past 18 months is less the result of the growing strength of the insurgency and more about the expanding influence of the Afghan government and the presence of Coalition Forces. The results of the September 2005 National

Assembly and Provincial Council Elections along with increased numbers of Afghan National Security Forces are both contributing to an increase in resistance in areas that the Taliban had previously considered benign. Additionally, in Regional Command South in the Helmand River Valley in Spring 2006 ISAF recently introduced the equivalent of a British Brigade where before there had only been a US company and Special Forces teams.

However, the Taliban undoubtedly feel they have enjoyed some measure of success with their strategy over the last 18 months. In all likelihood, 2007 will see the Taliban attempting to expand their presence to other Provinces and Districts in the south and east using the same methods that they perceive have been successful. From their perspective the situation does not call for a radical change in tactics. Therefore, barring any wildcards, such as the death or replacement of Mullah Omar as Taliban leader, 2007 will be a repeat of 2006.

Implications for US Policy

The illegal narcotics industries in Afghanistan possess perhaps the greatest long-term challenge for the Coalition. A failure to curb poppy cultivation and heroin production will undermine the continued development of the Afghan government, and to a lesser extent provide a needed source of revenue for local Taliban commanders. At the same time, overly aggressive poppy eradication operations have the potential to push large segments of the population into the hands of the insurgents.

The best course of action is to proceed cautiously with eradication while taking an aggressive approach to counter-trafficking efforts. The three principles to apply to eradication operations are:

- They must be planned and led by Afghans
- They must be tied to a robust alternative livelihoods program
- They must be executed equitably to minimize any perceptions of bias in execution

To realistically have a chance to accomplish the above, the Coalition will be required to provide the supporting technical expertise and oversight of all aspects of both planning and execution. The Coalition will also have to take the lead in developing the supporting alternative livelihoods programs, although actual execution should be done by the Afghans. As a rule, no eradication operation should take place without a supporting alternative livelihoods program. Otherwise, the local populace will be pushed into the arms of the Taliban. Execution of eradication operations must also be closely monitored to prevent abuse. Eradication operations that are perceived to be biased for or against a particular tribe will only deepen the fissures that already exist and further undermine the authority of the Provincial and District governments.

No single event could change the strategic direction of US and international strategy in the region more than the fall of the current GOP either by assassination, coup, or popular uprising. It would deal a severe blow not only to international efforts in Afghanistan, but also to the GWOT as a whole. Worse yet, if the GOP were to be replaced by an Islamist regime, it would have strategic implications for US and world security in the areas of both terrorism and nuclear weapons proliferation.

While the elimination of insurgent sanctuaries is critical to success, the US must be mindful of the potential domestic Pakistani political implications of US and Pakistani actions taken in the FATA or Baluchistan. In addressing the issue of insurgent sanctuaries in Pakistan, the US should continue to allow the Pakistanis to take the lead in all actions. However, to date Pakistani attempts to address the problem have run hot and cold. Periods of aggressive military action supporting Islamabad's attempts to assert sovereignty have been followed by 'truces' between the GOP and local tribes that have provided Afghan insurgents needed respites during which to regroup.

While the Pakistanis are accurate in asserting that the solution to the problems of the FATA and Baluchistan lies in economic development, the lack of that development does not preclude action against senior Afghan insurgent leadership targets in Pakistan. Given that the best tool for such selective targeting is a national law enforcement or intelligence agency, as opposed to the Pakistani military, the job falls on the Inter-Services Intelligence Directorate (ISID).²⁹

It is against the ISID with which the US needs to apply pressure on the GOP. The purpose of this pressure is, first and foremost, to weed out those elements within the agency that are sympathetic to the Taliban and other insurgent groups and who may be providing covert support. Secondly, this pressure must result in the aggressive recruiting of human intelligence sources that can locate and identify Afghan insurgent leadership nodes in their country. It is important to point out that as the ISID forms an integral part of the GOP's security apparatus, such a reform carries some risk. However, as the US will not make progress targeting senior insurgent and Al Qaeda leadership unless this happens, the risk is unavoidable.

Improving Governance and Security at the Local Level

According to the International Crisis Group, an independent, non-profit, non-governmental organization, "Internal reform is equally essential to end nearly five years of misrule by predatory leaders and a culture of impunity... This state of affairs has particular implications in the south, where many of the worst provincial and district leaders have close links to the central

administration. As a result, the disillusioned, the disenfranchised, and the economically desperate are responding again to the call of extremists in a region radicalized through decades of conflict.”³⁰ Therefore, nothing will go further to undermine Taliban gains in the south and east more than improving the quality of governance and security at the Provincial and District level.

In terms of Coalition action, this translates into more funding for local reconstruction initiatives and better trained and paid security forces, particularly the Afghan National Police.³¹ For the Afghan government, it means putting legislative emphasis on issues related to governance and accountability such as development of the judiciary and anti-corruption laws. It also means calling for improved accountability of local officials to ensure that they are not behaving in ways that will incite or exacerbate inter-tribal rivalry.

Exploiting Popular Support

In Afghanistan, Coalition Forces are perceived in a positive light by the local population who support reconstruction efforts and welcome the security that these forces bring. Here, the Coalition should seek to maintain the momentum we have had since 2001 by a continued campaign highlighting reconstruction efforts, and by undertaking a more aggressive campaign targeting the Taliban’s motives and methods. Because we are looked upon favorably, and because the Taliban enjoys little popular support, the population may be much more receptive to Coalition and Afghan government Information Operations. In Afghanistan, the real question is how we maintain the momentum that we started with.

Information Operations in Afghanistan should follow a two track approach. First, they should seek to foster the goodwill we have enjoyed since 2001 through a continued IO campaign highlighting reconstruction efforts and the growth of the Afghan government and security forces. This campaign should continue to be closely linked to visible progress on the ground. Secondly, the Coalition should adopt a much more aggressive campaign targeting the Afghan/Pakistani publics’ perceptions of the Taliban. The Coalition should develop and employ negative IO messages highlighting Taliban attacks on the clergy, education infrastructure and reconstruction workers, and the collateral civilian casualties of suicide attacks as evidence of the Taliban’s lack of concern for the average Afghan. The purpose of these messages is to maintain the negative perception most Afghans have for the insurgents.

Clamping Down on the Supply of Weapons.

Given the vast quantities of arms and ammunition still in circulation in Afghanistan, the problem of a cheap and plentiful supply of weapons and munitions for insurgents, warlords and criminals is unlikely to go away anytime in the next decade. However, as Coalition Forces

continue to make incremental progress in addressing the problem inside the country, little is being done on the Pakistani side of the border – thus ensuring that overall no progress is made. To have any real hope for success, the GOP must act to shut down the arms bazaars in the FATA. It is a task best suited to Pakistani military forces and is likely to illicit a negative local response as closing these markets will have an immediate and negative impact on the livelihoods of those involved. Like actively targeting insurgent leaders, it is a task that cannot wait.

Summary

The situation in Afghanistan today is more about Taliban efforts to counter the growing expansion of central government authority than it is about the increased popularity of the Taliban. The Afghan government and Coalition Forces still maintain the initiative and enjoy popular support. The appeal of the ideology of the insurgents is still largely limited to hard-line religious conservatives who represent a minority of the population in the mostly Pashtun south and east. The fact that the Taliban have been able to exploit tribal fissures, poor governance, and the desperate economic conditions to their advantage should be cause for concern but not interpreted as evidence of the impending collapse of the democratically-elected Afghan government. What the recent surge in insurgent activity represents is a growing challenge to continued progress, which if successful could derail the entire effort.

To meet this challenge, the Coalition and the Afghan government need to continue to place emphasis on developing the country's weak national institutions, and increase their efforts to expand the government's authority at the local level. In many respects, such an approach represents the next logical step in the reconstruction of the country. We have put in place a central government, created the basis for a disciplined Afghan National Army, and started the process of forming a professional police force. All of our efforts in Afghanistan will be fruitless if we do not leave behind strong national institutions, but we will never bring peace or prosperity if we do not improve governance and security at the local level, and succeed in instituting the rule of law for the average Afghan.

The Afghan government and Coalition also need to take steps to combat the illegal narcotics industry to deny insurgents both a source of funding and eliminate an issue with which the insurgents can drive a wedge between the people and the government. Even without an insurgency, Afghanistan will never achieve the security and stability it seeks if half of its economy is tied to the production of illegal drugs. This problem primarily requires an economic solution that provides alternative livelihoods to Afghan farmers. Poppy eradication operations

should support the overall campaign and not be the focus of the Government's efforts. To do otherwise would be to push the people into the arms of the insurgents.

Additionally, Pakistan must do more to both deny senior Afghan insurgent leaders sanctuary and to curb the flow of illegal weapons and munitions across the border. The targeting of insurgent leaders would best be performed through selective methods that would avoid inciting a popular backlash in the FATA and Baluchistan, and thus reduce the risk to President Musharraf. This task cannot be accomplished without the active participation of a willing and committed ISID. To curb the flow of illegal arms will require the intervention of Pakistani military forces in those areas, such as Darra Adam Khel, where there is a thriving industry. As in dealing with the illegal narcotics industry in Afghanistan, a program emphasizing alternative livelihoods for the craftsmen involved in the industry is needed if it is to stand a chance for success.

Finally, in support of all the above, the Coalition and Afghan Government should re-double their efforts within the context of a broader information operations campaign. After all, it is perhaps in the court of public opinion where the Coalition enjoys its most significant advantage. Such a campaign should be designed to re-enforce positive national perceptions of the Coalition and Afghan Government, and attack Taliban methods in areas in dispute.

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